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ABSTRACT

The Tulsa, Oklahoma, board of education has adopted as policy an academic freedom statement that was developed by a committee composed of board members, administrators, teachers, and librarians. The prelude to the statement contains six important points dealing with (1) the need for such a policy statement, (2) school responsibility, (3) educators' rights and responsibilities, (4) students' responsibilities, (5) parental and community responsibilities, and (6) parents' rights. The policy statement reflects the belief of educators in the Tulsa public schools that the school system must be sensitive to the mores of its community in selecting materials for use in the school. The procedures for school book selections and the board policy and regulations for review of challenged materials is working in the Tulsa Public School system as shown by only one challenge of classroom materials since 1976. Other school systems could benefit by examining the approaches the Tulsa Board of Education has taken. The question of what and how students shall learn must be resolved through positive cooperation between educators and lay citizens, rather than through the adversarial approach experienced by so many school systems. Successful efforts are being carried out in school systems across the country and it is important that educators search for those rather than giving undue attention to the unsuccessful approaches highlighted by the media. (HTH)

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A Presentation to the

1981 National Council of Teachers of English Convention

"School Book Selection: Procedures, Challenges and Responses"

by Larry L. Zenke, Superintendent

Tulsa Public Schools

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School book selection procedures in the Tulsa Public Schools are somewhat complex, as they are in most urban areas. Oklahoma is one of the twenty-two states having statewide adoption procedures for school textbooks. These state-adopted classroom textbooks are selected by a board of twelve professional educators and one lay person, all of whom are appointed by the governor. The selection process in the state of Oklahoma allows for the selection of textbooks from ten publishers per subject area with adoptions for five-year periods of time. Recently, the legislature began appropriating dollars for supplementary materials in addition to the dollars provided for the purchase of textbooks from the state-adopted list. In addition to the state textbook allocation and the supplemental state allocation, the Tulsa School District budgets a very sizable allocation for textbooks and library books from local funds

Some years ago it appeared that there would be a proliferation of individuals or groups demanding the right of censorship regarding classroom and library materials. Our Division of Instruction worked for more than a year developing an academic freedom statement that was ultimately adopted as policy by the Tulsa Board of Education. The policy statement itself is contained in one brief paragraph which states, "Academic freedom is the right and responsibility of educators and students to study, investigate, present, interpret and discuss all facts and ideas relevent to the subject

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matter of the classroom and appropriate to the maturity and intellectual and emotional capacities of the students. Such academic freedom exists because it is necessary to the effective exercise of the basic responsibility of the school: to guide students toward the knowledge and understanding befitting free, reasoning, and responsible human beings."

Although the policy statement as adopted by the Tulsa Board of Education is relatively brief, the statement as developed by the committee composed of board members, central office administrators and supervisors, teachers, and librarians. contains six major points in the prelude to the statement which are as important as the board policy statement of academic freedom itself. These six major points are:

Rationale

> Freedom means choice. Institutions such as the public schools, which support the American democratic process, must be concerned with the ways in which human beings, individually and collectively, resolve conflicts and select among alternatives. Such decisions involve values, goals, facts and analysis.
>
> In a free society schools exist primarily to help students develop their abilities to make intelligent and responsible decisions in their personal lives and in the life of the society to which they belong.
>
> The development of these abilities implies a responsibility which falls upon the teacher and other representatives of the educational institution, upon the parents and the community which support the public schools, and upon the students themselves.

Responsibility of the School

> The responsibility of the school is to provide a climate conducive to rational and free inquiry, so that students may learn how to think, rather than what to think. A climate thus conducive to inquiry is essential to the American academic and political tradition which stresses the free contest of ideas.
>
> The free contest and examination of ideas will necessarily invite differing opinions, sometimes even controversy. The school, rather than avoiding such controversy, should welcome it. The learning process must involve the encounter of problems to be solved as an academic prelude to the experiences which students will encounter in their lives.

Rights and Responsibilities of Educators

The free contest and examination of ideas places an acknowledged burden on the teachers and other representatives of the school. That burden, of course, is the selection of, and approach to, instructional materials. Educators must select and be free to select materials consistent with the 1973 Supreme Court ruling on obscenity and pornography. Materials will contribute to the achievement of the school's primary goal: the development of the individual's ability to make intelligent and responsible decisions as delineated in the Statement of Philosophy and Goals of Tulsa Independent District No. One where it states, "a major obligation of the Tulsa Public Schools is the Personal Goal to assist each child to develop as fully as possible such intellectual, physical, and moral potential as he or she may possess in order to live a creative, useful, and personally satisfying life."

The responsibility assumed by the agents of the schools and the freedom which must be granted them in the exercise of that responsibility are matched by the responsibilities and freedoms which exist for students, their parents, and the community at large. In addition, decisions on the method of instruction are the province of educators.

Responsibilities of Students

First of all, the students themselves have the responsibility of participating in the life of the school in such a way as to benefit as fully as possible from that which the school offers in terms of opportunities for intellectual, social, physical, and moral development. Students assume the further responsibility of conducting themselves in such a way that they do not impair the similar participation of other students. Students remain free, however, to explore controversial issues and to identify, understand, express, and defend their own opinions.

Responsibilities of Parents and Community

The responsibilities of parents and community are to support the activities of the school when they contribute to the achievement of the school's philosophy and goals, and to examine objectively the school's performance in the pursuit of its stated goals.

Students, parents, and other members of the community retain the right to seek information about materials, course requirements, and evaluation procedures. Schools must provide full and fair consideration to those who take issue with school decisions and be prepared to resolve such conflicts so that the schools function to the satisfaction of the majority of the community. In the same manner, teachers must be provided fair procedure and due process should complaints arise about materials or course content.

Rights of Parents

> In any case, parents have the right to participate in the selection of materials for their own children. This right does not, however, permit the parent to dictate what the children of other parents may read, see, or discuss.

The Statement of Academic Freedom

> Academic freedom, then, is the right and responsibility of educators and students to study, investigate, present, interpret, and discuss all facts and ideas relevant to the subject matter of the classroom and appropriate to the maturity and intellectual and emotional capacities of the students. Such academic freedom exists because it is necessary to the effective exercise of the basic responsibility of the school: to guide students toward the knowledge and understanding befitting free, reasoning, and responsible human beings.

It is a strong belief in the Tulsa Public Schools, however, that school systems must be sensitive to the mores of its community in selecting materials for use in the schools. I feel that we have been successful in our efforts to be sensitive in Tulsa. Our last official challenge of materials was in 1976. It was resolved through a committee process. As part of the process of school book selection, the Division of Instruction maintains a committee entitled, "The Evaluation Committee for Challenge of Materials," which follows nine procedural guidelines in responding to a complainant. The complainant in 1976 was protesting the use of the book "Of Mice and Men" in one of our senior high schools.

I would suggest to you that our procedures for school book selections and the board policy and administrative regulations for review of challenged materials is working in the Tulsa Public Schools as evidenced by only one challenge to materials being used in the classrooms in the past five years. I firmly believe that our experience has not been due to luck, but due to some good planning on the part of the Tulsa Public Schools to avoid unnecessary confrontation and strife within the schools resulting from challenged materials. Other school systems across the nation can

well-benefit from our experience by examining approaches we have taken, and in addition, by referring to the recommendations of the summary report of the survey "Book and Material Selection for School Libraries and Classrooms: Procedures, Challenges and Responses" as sponsored by the Association of American Publishers, the American Library Association, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development as published in 1981. The critical importance of the area of school book selection as reported in this summary report entitled, "Limiting What Students Shall Read," is emphasized in the introduction to the summary report where the statement is made, "The issue of censorship in our schools--its extent, the origin and nature of the challenges to books and materials, the resolution of those challenges, their perceived impact on the educational environment, and their relationship to the overall process by which instructional and library materials are selected--is too important to be evaluated solely on the basis of scattered reports, occasional headlines about book burning, celebrated cases of high court litigation, or unsupported claims by contestants in the educational or political arena. At the heart of the issue lie the difficult questions of what and how students shall learn--questions crucial to all who vie for influence over the future direction of our pluralistic society."

The heart of the issue--the difficult question of what and how students shall learn--needs to be increasingly resolved during the decade of the 80's through a positive cooperative approach between professional educators and lay citizens, rather than through a negative adversarial approach as has been the experience in some school systems during the decade of the 70's. Professionals and lay citizens can work together to help establish for school systems across the nation for the decade of the

80's, a model as demonstrated by the Tulsa Public Schools for "School Book Selection: Procedures, Challenges and Responses", rather than another model which received extensive national media attention during the decade past, that of the Kanawha County, West Virginia school system.

Seldom do we read, see or hear in the national news media of successful efforts to address problems within public school systems across the nation. However, such successful efforts are being carried out in school system after school system across the nation and it is important that we search for such successful approaches rather than giving undue attention to those unsuccessful approaches which receive the majority of the national media attention. Successes are in evidence and it has been my experience that educators who have successfully responded to such problems and challenges are more than willing to share their approaches and demonstrated successes. That certainly is the case with us in Tulsa and I invite you to examine our approaches and use whatever ideas or materials which would be of utility to you as you approach the issue of "School Book Selection: Procedures, Challenges, and Responses."